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A Solution to the Multitude of Books: Ephraim Chambers's Cyclopaedia (1728) as "the Best Book in the Universe "

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Abstract

This article considers Ephraim Chambers's Cyclopaedia (2 Vols., 1728) as a work that responded to anxieties about information overload. Chambers drew on Renaissance ideas about summarizing and organizing knowledge—in particular, the humanist practice of keeping a commonplace book. By completing an alphabetical dictionary with due deference to categories, or Heads, he not only offered a convenient summary of knowledge but retained the notion of an encyclopedic circle of arts and sciences. The article also relates this concept of authorial design to debates surrounding the 1710 copyright Statute in England.

A Solution to the Multitude of Books: Ephraim Chambers's *Cyclopaedia* (1728) as "the Best Book in the Universe"

Richard Yeo

Since the late twentieth century the caption "information age" has been a dominant characterization of Western and, increasingly, of global culture. These observations have been joined by the complaint that it is difficult for individuals to locate the information they require, to discriminate between reliable and unreliable sources, and to distinguish between knowledge and information—issues exacerbated by the divide between so-called information rich and information poor societies. It is common, in both academic and public spheres, for this set of problems to be ascribed to the impact of electronic information technologies and encapsulated in the term "information explosion."¹ But this phenomenon is not unprecedented, for as historians of the book and print culture are beginning to demonstrate, some of its essential features were apparent in early modern Europe.²

As Ann Blair has shown, concerns about the increasing number of books were expressed as early as the first century after the invention of printing. By the seventeenth century this issue had attracted the attention of some major figures such as Johann Heinrich Alsted, Jan Amos Comenius, Pierre Bayle, and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. When he arrived in London in 1641, Comenius was astonished by the vast number of books on display—far more, he thought,

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¹ J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner (eds.), *The Oxford English Dictionary* (20 vols.; Oxford, 1989), VII, 945 records the first uses of this term in the 1960s. Alvin Toffler used the term "information overload" in *Future Shock* (London, 1970), 311.

² For recent work relevant to this theme, see Peter Burke, *A Social History of Knowledge: From Gutenberg to Diderot* (Cambridge, 2000) and Richard Yeo, *Encyclopaedic Visions: Scientific Dictionaries and Enlightenment Culture* (Cambridge, 2001); see also my review-essay of Burke's book, "Managing Knowledge in Early Modern Europe," *Minerva*, 40 (2002), 304-14.



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